United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/48

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
2 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by National Council of Women of the United States, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-61914 (E) 221211

Please recycle

Statement

The present statement was developed around the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", as it relates to rural women in farming, food production and the agricultural sector.

We urge Member States to address the pressing legal, economic, education and social needs of rural women small farmers and women employed in the agricultural sector in the United States of America and developing countries around the world.

Rural women-owned small farms contribute to local and national economies

At least 80 per cent of rural smallholder farmers worldwide are women (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 1995). Women small farmers produce as much as 50 per cent of the world's food, and agriculture contributes to countries' gross domestic product (GDP) at rates ranging from 1.1 per cent to as high as 60 per cent. Women smallholder farmers create local employment through demand for labour, processing, storage and transportation of produce. Farmers and farm labourers spend their increased incomes on goods and services in the local (rural) economies (G. Meijerink and P. Roza, 2007).

The contribution of rural women small farmers, though often unaccounted for in world economic statistics, is vital to food security for the majority of the world's population and to the local and national economies of many countries. Tipper Gore, wife of former United States Vice President Al Gore, in an address to the second International Conference on Women in Agriculture, held in Washington, D.C. in 1998, acknowledged the importance of women in agriculture as "key to the survival of mankind" when she stated that "contributions [of women small farmers] are deserving of value by society because women contribute to the economics of their households, communities and the world".

Yet, despite the fact that women farmers provide a large percentage of the world's food, at the third International Conference on Women in Agriculture, held in Madrid in 2002, it was acknowledged that little had changed for rural women farmers in the United States and their counterparts around the world. The problems persist because women small farmers are not afforded the same respect, status or benefits as men and lack the education, equipment and financial support they need to become substantial contributors in the agribusiness sector.

It is estimated that the number of the world's hungry would decrease by between 100 million and 150 million (FAO, 2010) if women farmers were able to increase their agricultural yields. Yet, Governments, businesses and societies are not meeting the needs of women farmers for education, land acquisition, credit and extension services, tools and other inputs that could increase their yields, expand their commercial opportunities and benefit their local communities and their countries' economies.

Rural women farmers get less support than men

In developing countries, discriminatory legislation, cultural traditions and attitudes towards the value of women's work contribute to a lack of equal rights and

support for women. Men often hold deeds to land that women work. Women are given plots of land on infertile soil, far from water sources. The work of rural women farmers is not accounted for in censuses and therefore is not factored into local, national and international policymakers' decisions regarding programmes for food and livestock production.

More attention is paid to crops, usually grown by men, that are slated for export, and less attention is paid to crops grown by women that are slated for local consumption, even though local produce is essential to food security and hunger eradication. Most Governments fail to promote and protect the land rights of women and support large-scale commercial farming rather than smallholder farming. Male children often have greater access than girls to education, information and resources that can help them to become better producers. In developed countries, women have difficulty securing credit for their small farm ventures and many do not possess experience or knowledge in developing and executing business plans that can build equity for credit. It is difficult for these small farmers to grow crops, negotiate distribution channels, take goods to market, take care of families, often while holding down a second job, and learn how to write business plans, or submit applications for grants and loans.

"Feminization" of agriculture has mixed benefits

An FAO document issued in 1999 showed that the proportion of women involved in agriculture and food production has steadily increased, particularly in developing countries. Collectively, in Africa, Asia, the Near East, the Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe, women provide more than half of the labour in food production. Women are increasingly employed in food processing industries and, traditionally, are the sole preparers of food for their families. As such, they have the responsibility for the nutritional well-being of the entire family and, by extension, the community. While this participation in food production and the agricultural labour force is increasing, much of this work is arduous and low-paying, and the farming yields remain at the subsistence level. Yet, many local, national and international organizations acknowledge that women hold the key to food security.

Women's labour is a key solution to food insecurity

The International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, D.C., highlighted eight research findings in a 2000 report (available at www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ib3.pdf) that confirmed "the central role women play as producers of food, managers of natural resources, income earners, and caretakers of household food and nutrition security". A summary of the study's findings indicated, inter alia, that:

- Agricultural productivity increases dramatically when women get the same amount of inputs men get
- Increasing women's human capital is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty
- Increasing women's assets raises investments in education and girls' health
- Women's education and status within the household contribute more than 50 per cent to the reduction of child malnutrition

- Good care practices can mitigate the effects of poverty and low maternal schooling on children's nutrition

Local food groups and national initiatives offer solutions for hunger eradication

Local food movements, such as the Wanaqua Community School Garden Program in the Bronx, New York supported by the National Council of Women of the United States, can serve as a template for hunger eradication. Globally, community food enterprises that are committed to the growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, marketing, distributing, wholesaling, retailing or serving of local and regional food can provide employment. Examples of successful community food enterprises include Panchakanya Agriculture Cooperative Limited, a women's organic fruit and vegetable cooperative in Nepal, and Ajddigue Women's Argan Cooperative in Morocco, which helps women in Morocco to extract and sell oil from native argan trees to cosmetic companies worldwide at fair trade prices (Wallace Center, 2010).

In 2009, the United States Department of Agriculture launched the "Know your farmer, know your food" programme, a national initiative that supports President Obama's administration's commitment to strengthening local and regional food systems to provide communities with healthier food choices.

Conclusions and recommendations

Supporting women smallholder farmers contributes to the strength of local economies, supports the health and nutritional needs of children, families and communities and promotes sustainable development for the life of our planet. Therefore, we urge Member States to acknowledge and support rural women smallholder farmers and local food movements, education, policy and sustainable practices by:

- Encouraging reformation of land rights policies through legislation that gives rural women access and rights to own land in their own names
- Advocating that the contributions of rural women farmers be recognized, tabulated and included in the GDPs of all countries
- Providing access to resources such as seeds, tools and other agricultural inputs
- Supporting the implementation of programmes to educate rural women farmers in sustainable farming techniques, including best practices that incorporate technology, crop rotation, irrigation, local natural fertilizers, etc.
- Educating rural women farmers on the impact of environmental degradation and how to prevent and mitigate the effects of natural environmental impacts (flood, drought, etc.) and negative farming practices (cutting down trees, monoculture, etc.)
- Gathering and cataloguing women's traditional knowledge and information on agriculture, fisheries, livestock management and natural resources management
- Establishing organizations such as food and farmers' cooperatives, local and national organizations and associations that promote rural women farmers, and including women in the decision-making within these organizations

- Supporting organizations and banks that offer microcredit to women farmers
- Providing access to markets outside of local communities so that women can sell surpluses to outside markets
- Supporting labour laws that ensure commensurate wages for women's work within the food and agricultural industries

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: International Council of Women, National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Medical Women's International Association, Soroptimist International and World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations.